



Women's Centres Connect Annual Report 2012-2013

This report outlines the activities of Women's Centres Connect for the period April 1, 2012 to March 31, 2013. It begins with funding and government relations, in which Connect continued to lobby for and received an increase in core funding, as well as core funding to Nova Scotia's newest women's centre—the Strait Area Women's Place. The report then highlights the presentations to the three official party caucuses, and Connect's participation in the Department of Community Service's Building Connections. Next it outlines progress on expanding sexual assault services in rural Nova Scotia and Connect's participation in Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Women's centres' violence prevention work, which was showcased at the Youth Take the Lead—Healthy Relationships for Youth Forum, is then described. Next, Connect's advocacy on social issues and its leadership in the Women's Action Alliance for Change (WACNS) is summarized. The report concludes with a section on Connect's role in the newly established voluntary sector council, and its support for transgender inclusion work.

Core Funding and Government Relations

Core Funding A primary function of Connect is lobbying the Department of Community Services for increases to women's centres' core funding. One of the key issues over the years has been the disparity between transition houses and women's centres: transition houses get an annual cost of living increase on the salary portion of their budgets, women's centres do not. Community Services has steadfastly refused to rectify this, citing a difference in the status of transition houses as essential services. Connect's briefing note to the three party caucuses made these points with respect to funding:

- Women's centres continue to face the challenges associated with inadequate funding. In 2010, Connect estimated that funding was 6% below what centres received in 2000, *even with* the \$27,000 increase the NDP government provided that year to women's centres. Women's centres continue to lose competent, trained staff as a result. For small agencies a staff change can have a major impact. It alters not only how services and programs are provided, but also which ones can be offered or continued. Staff changes also mean additional training, realignment of duties, staff relations and working conditions.
- Women's centres are the backbone of programs and services for women in rural communities across Nova Scotia. With restrictions and cut-backs on social services, women's centres are the final resource many women have. For example, we are seeing an increasing number of immigrant women using our programs and services. We respond to whatever issues women bring to us. We are leaders in community engagement and development. We are an

important voice for women's equality. Women are the mainstay of the non-profit, voluntary sector. Our work must be adequately compensated.

As a result of Connect's persistence in getting a meeting with the NDP caucus in February, 2013, we were successful in getting salary increases of 2% for the fiscal year 2013-14. This was not made retroactive to April, 2012, however, which was a disappointment.

Connect also asked that Nova Scotia's newest women's centre receive core funding. The Strait Area Women's Place in Port Hawkesbury opened in May, 2011, initially as a partnership between Leaside Society, which operates the Leaside Transition House, and the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. It operated for the first year with a grant from the IWK. Since then the doors have been kept open on a part-time basis with Leaside Society and the Antigonish Centre providing staff, and Leaside paying for rent and utilities. In September, 2011, the Strait Area Women's Place made a funding request of \$70,000 to the Department of Community Services. This would have allowed the centre to be open five days per week. The request was denied. This decision was reversed in February, 2013 and the Strait Area Women's Place has its initial core funding in place, although not yet at the level of other women's centres. Connect looks forward to the Strait Area Women's Place soon becoming a member.

The government did not act on Connect's request to have its budget covered by Community Services in the same manner as the Transition House Association of NS (THANS). Women's centres fund Connect out of their own budgets. Having government funding would take some financial pressure off each centre. This issue will continue to be a priority going forward.

Government Relations Connect met with both opposition parties: the full Liberal caucus in October, 2012 and with the Progressive Conservative Party researchers in September. As well as the funding issues reviewed above, we reviewed these priorities:

- The need for expanded sexual violence services in rural communities, ideally through women's centres;
- Support for the inclusion of Healthy Relationships for Youth programming—a made in Nova Scotia model-- in all schools in Nova Scotia and the delivery and funding of these programs through women's centres and other community-based organizations;
- Housing and homelessness: (1) work with our rural communities to develop a community-based *housing first approach* for at risk and homeless youth, ensuring these youth have a continuum of housing supports that will prevent homeless; (2) use a gender analysis to foreground and address the housing needs of women and their families through the public and non-profit sectors; (3) fast-track affordable housing plans and commit additional funds for affordable, subsidized, supportive housing;
- Poverty reduction and elimination: (1) provide actual shelter and transportation costs to people on IA; (2) make affordable public transportation in rural areas a priority and commit funds to it; (3) improve protection and enforcement of labour standards; (4) legislate employment benefits for part-time, temporary and contract workers; (5) provide extended

health benefits for workers not currently covered; (6) extend pay and employment equity requirements to the private sector; (7) ensure that all low-income families have access to affordable, quality, regulated child care with adequate subsidies; (8) work with community groups and agencies to develop an awareness campaign to change public perception about who is poor and why; (9) adopt an accepted measure of poverty (LICO, LIM, or MBM) as a standard for moving ESIA allowances to guaranteed livable incomes; and commit to a timetable for meeting this standard; (10) commit to funding a pilot project testing the impact of a guaranteed livable income on women with disabilities and single mothers on income assistance in collaboration with Women's Centres Connect.

Building Connections Working Group This working group, called together by the Minister of Community Services, includes fifteen (15) provincial organizations representing service providers and ten (10) representatives from DCS, including the Minister and Deputy Minister. These top officials do not attend meetings as a rule. All regional administrators do attend and provide useful information and updates. During this past year it has met every second month. The highlight was a full hour with the new Deputy Minister of DCS, Rob Wood. He laid out his priorities which include: (1) internal restorative practice implementation; (2) employment support (eg getting people off assistance and into the workforce); (3) social inclusion for persons with disabilities; (4) the housing strategy; (5) increased adoptions for teenagers in care; (6) early intervention services for children. Connect continues to ask for a meeting with the Deputy Minister to discuss ways women's centres can work with him on these priorities.

Sexual Violence

Business Case for Expanding Sexual Violence Services through women's centres The lack of government support for sexual violence services in rural Nova Scotia continues to be an issue of concern to women's centres as we provide services to women and girls who are survivors, as well as deliver in-school and in-centre violence-prevention programs. Connect's business case calls for the expansion of sexual violence services in rural Nova Scotia within the existing structure and mandate of women's centres. As noted above, this proposal was part of our presentations to the three party caucuses.

Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) Connect's co-ordinator was a member of the provincial planning committee for SAAM (May in Nova Scotia) for the second year. The committee, called together by the Advisory Council on the Status of Women (ACSW), includes Avalon Sexual Assault Centre, the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia, Stepping Stone, the Halifax Police, the RCMP, Department of Justice and Health and Wellness officials, as well as ACSW and government communications staff. The plan for this year include a formal kick-off at Province House and a reception at Halifax City Hall on May 3, and highlighting of regional and local events and activities. For the first time since SAAM has been marked in Nova Scotia, Connect has a place on the podium. Our public profile continues to be increased as a result, particularly in the area of sexual violence.

In-school Violence Prevention

Women's centres consider prevention to be an integral part of our response to all kinds of violence against women. Our work across Nova Scotia includes offering healthy relationship education to Jr. and Sr. high school students. The Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) program, for example, has been offered in the Strait Regional School board for several years by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association. It is also offered at Duncan MacMillan School in the Halifax Region by LEA Place Women's Centre in Sheet Harbour. Other in-school programs offered by women's centres include (this is not an exhaustive list): 1) Voices: an 18 week in-school program of self-discovery and empowerment for girls 13-17 who are at risk of dropping out of school, susceptible to or involved in high risk behaviours, and at risk of not reaching their full potential; 2) Inspire: a 10 session program designed for adolescent girls who are facing challenges and or barriers in their lives; and 3) CAP The Child Assault Prevention Project which teaches children to prevent verbal, physical, and sexual assault. Trained facilitators work within the school to present role plays, and engage children in a discussion and problem solving scenarios.

Youth Take The Lead: Healthy Relationships for Youth Forum: On February 27-28 in Truro, Women's Centres Connect and the Resisting Violence Project (AWRC &SASA) hosted a provincial forum to showcase youth-led violence prevention programs that are community or school-based. This two day event brought together youth, service providers and government officials to discuss the importance of healthy relationship programming in Nova Scotia. These programs address a variety of issues such as hypersexualization, bullying, self-esteem, dating violence, power, gender identity, sexual orientation, substance abuse and media analysis.

The forum provided an opportunity for participants to engage with youth facilitators, gather information on current programming, and participate in exploring various ways of improving access to healthy relationship education across the province. The violence prevention programs showcased at the forum included Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY), Inspire/Voices/Striking Balance, Resisting Violence: Rural Women and Girls Take Action, and Youth Truth Matters Sexual Violence Tool Kit. Approximately 80 people attended the forum. Many left inspired to work on getting HRY programs in various school boards across Nova Scotia. Connect will continue to work on making this a reality.

Social Policy Advocacy and Women's Action Alliance for Change Nova Scotia (WACNS)

Social Policy Advocacy The Nova Scotia Government released its Housing Strategy Discussion Paper in November 2012. Women's Centres Connect submitted a brief—*Affordable Housing for Women in Rural Nova Scotia*—and also added our name to a joint submission by several other grassroots

organizations. The Provincial Housing Strategy invites all sectors of the economy to collaborate in the creation of affordable housing developments. Women's Centres Connect welcomed this strategy that promises a new, dynamic approach to building communities that are mixed economically and socially. The recommendations in our brief (listed below) fill gaps in and add specifics to the Housing Strategy based on the experiences of women and young people in rural Nova Scotia.

1. Immediate funding for project co-ordination to support community-based projects already underway; and for project development and community capacity-building to enable the community-based not-for-profit sector to participate as equals in the development work required by the medium/long term strategy of building diverse, mixed communities;
2. An increase in social housing (including second stage and supportive housing) to meet the specific needs of women and young people at risk;
3. A housing first model that provides supportive housing for young people, recognizing that going home is not an option for most young people, and that foster homes and group homes are scarce or unavailable in rural communities;
4. An increase in the funding available through Efficiency Nova Scotia's Low-Income Homeowner's Program. According to the NS Government website the program is currently taking no new applications for those heating with electricity and delaying approval of those heating from other sources until mid-2013;
5. An increase in the number of rent supplements available, and supplementing the rent of people on income assistance whose housing is unaffordable and/or below minimum standards of health and decency;
6. Accessible and renter-friendly Residential Tenancy Boards ; clearly assigned responsibility for the enforcement of building codes and health and safety standards; and an adequate number of inspectors is to regulate and police adequately the level and amount of sub-standard housing in Nova Scotia;
7. Adequate funds to meet the demand for other existing programs for low-income homeowners;
8. Transparency about the status of cost-shared programs, such as the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program.

WACNS—Women's Action Alliance for Change NS Women's Centres Connect continued to be active in WACNS, lending its co-ordinator to the steering committee, as well as individual women's centres taking executive roles. WACNS produced a brochure for women with information about how to vote in municipal elections held in October, 2012. The annual assembly was held on November 2, with over 40 women in attendance. Our co-ordinator was one of the primary organizers and leaders in the assembly; she also researched and produced the WACNS Report Card reviewing the provincial government's progress on the recommendations in WACNS' 2012 Brief. A new immigrant women's enterprise did the catering. Strategic directions were presented and updated for the three issue areas and there several new faces joined the Steering Committee.

Support for Trans-Inclusion Work and the Voluntary Non-Profit Sector Council

Transforming Feminism: Creating Feminist Space for Trans Women This was a conference in Peterborough at the end of September that the community co-ordinator of Second Story Women's Centre attended with Connect providing some money toward expenses. She will be part of a panel discussion about feminist spaces welcoming trans-gender people. She asked what centres have done in terms of policy changes and training for doing this. Interest was expressed in written policies and developing trans-friendly spaces. Also, Connect's co-ordinator met with a trans-woman who would like to assist and support women's centres to become trans-welcoming.

Voluntary Sector Council Connect's representative on this council continued to take an active role in its development and management. She became the chair of the board when the council was incorporated. The Council is being well-funded by the provincial government, with salary levels well above those of women's centres executive directors. The issue of remuneration for women—who make up 87% of the not-for-profit sector staff—is of primary importance to women's centres and will be a focus going forward.

Conclusion and Thank You

Sometimes the changes Connect seeks seem a long time coming, which makes the victories sweet when they do happen. This year we achieved another core funding increase as well as funding for the newest women's centre in rural Nova Scotia. We co-hosted a successful provincial conference on healthy relationships in-school programming to prevent violence against women and girls. Each women's centre continued to provide excellent services and programming for women and girls in their communities.

To the eight women who represent women's centres around the Connect table: your leadership in the struggle for women's rights ensures that the voices of women are heard and the issues affecting us are kept on the public agenda. It continues to be a pleasure to work with you.

All of which is respectfully submitted

Jeanne Fay, Co-ordinator

May 14, 2013